

What the education-funding lawsuit means to moms

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Stephanie McCleary and her son Carter McCleary, 17, leave the McCleary school-funding hearing in Olympia Wednesday. (Erika Schultz/The Seattle Times)

The two moms whose names are on the McCleary school-funding lawsuit have been waiting a long time to be finished with their work representing the families of Washington state.

By [DONNA GORDON BLANKINSHIP](#)
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Stephanie McCleary, Patty Venema and I all had daughters in middle school when they joined a coalition of school districts, teachers, parents and community groups in suing the state of Washington over unequal funding of public schools.

I was a reporter covering education policy for The Associated Press when Venema and McCleary volunteered in 2007 to have their names on what is now known as the McCleary lawsuit. We caught up last week after the Washington Supreme Court's latest hearing on the case and all agreed we never expected still to be talking about this case nearly 10 years later.

It's been four years since our daughters graduated from high school and headed to Western Washington University. Any solution to school funding will be years too late to benefit Perry Blankinship, Kelsey McCleary and Halie Venema, whatever the

Legislature decides to do. But we all still care about unfairness in Washington's education system and believe every student in our state deserves an equally great education.



Donna Gordon Blankinship

Since 2007, nine senior classes of Washington public-school students have finished their education in a state where their addresses determine the quality of education they will get. Opportunities for college-prep classes, modern facilities, up-to-date curricula and state-of-the-art computer equipment all remain a reflection of how much local money a school district can raise, both through property-tax levies and donations.

The state Supreme Court ruled in 2012 that the way Washington pays for education is unconstitutional, in part because of an overreliance on local dollars to pay expenses that should be covered by the state budget.

In 2007, my daughter, Perry, was a student in one of the best-funded districts in the state, Bellevue Public Schools. Kelsey McCleary and her brother, Carter, and Halie Venema and her brother, Robbie, were attending schools where money for education wasn't as easy to get because of lower property values and less wealth.

At Perry's school, PTA parents raised whatever additional money generous taxpayers couldn't — sometimes paying the salary of a librarian when the district said it couldn't. The parent-teacher associations in the Chimacum and Snohomish school districts — where the McClearys and Venemas, respectively, live — did fundraising, too, to buy the basics of education, from textbooks to copy paper.

While Stephanie McCleary and Patty Venema were troubled by the age and quality of the textbooks at their children's schools, Bellevue parents were arguing about whether their schools could buy a second set of textbooks so our kids wouldn't get sore backs carrying heavy backpacks to and from school.

On the first day of fifth grade, when Perry's school decided a class of nearly 30 students was too big, the Bellevue School District hired another teacher and split the class in two,

giving her a class of fewer than 15 students. In most Washington school districts, the teacher of an unexpectedly large class would be told just to do his or her best.

In Perry's high school, more than half the classes — from physics to American history to art — were taught as Advanced Placement courses, giving students a taste of college-level work and the possibility of earning college credit. Only a handful of AP classes are taught in Chimacum, a rural district on the Olympic Peninsula. Snohomish falls somewhere in between, with more than a dozen AP classes offered. As my daughter's world history teacher told me years ago, the most important part of AP classes is not the college credit; it's the college preparation.

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District budgets offer another perspective. According to data from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Bellevue currently spends about \$11,900 per student. Chimacum spends just over \$11,000, and Snohomish spends just over \$10,400 per student. The difference comes from local levies and local fundraising. Another difference: Larger school districts like Bellevue and Snohomish can purchase in bulk, share teachers for smaller programs like music and have more parents to pay program fees or attend fundraisers.

Chimacum Superintendent Rick Thompson says another difference is in the facilities. In Bellevue, most schools have been replaced with modern buildings over the past decade. Chimacum has failed repeatedly to pass a new construction bond to replace its 1948 elementary school. The last construction bond failed despite 59 percent voter approval. I believe buildings are part of basic education — if smaller class sizes and all-day kindergarten are included — and the Legislature should change the bond-approval level to a simple majority.

Perry Blankinship, Kelsey McCleary and Halie Venema all seem to be succeeding despite their varied educational experiences; many students need a lot more than motivation and involved parents to push them toward success. The inequity in the way Washington schools are supported needs to end before another generation passes through the state's classrooms.

Donna Gordon Blankinship's column appears regularly on editorial pages of The Times. Her email address is dblankinship@seattletimes.com. On Twitter [@dgblankinship](https://twitter.com/dgblankinship).